Bacteria, lead biggest contaminants of New Orleans floodwater

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Sewage-related bacteria and lead from unknown sources are the two contaminants most evident in tests of the floodwaters in New Orleans, although high levels of hexavalent chromium, used in industrial plating, and arsenic, used in treating wood, have also been found.

"Whether it's lead paint or lead from batteries, we don't what the source is. But we know we've got a high level, and that's of concern to us," Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen Johnson said Wednesday, revealing test results from samples taken during the past two weeks. One sample had lead at 56 times the EPA's limit for drinking water; two other samples had it at nearly twice and more than three times the limit.

Johnson said he has convened a panel of outside experts to advise the agency on what he called "the largest national disaster that we at EPA or we believe the nation has faced."

Johnson briefed reporters after giving the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee what Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., called "a grave and sobering assessment" of the trouble. "We heard that the degree of environmental damage is considered catastrophic," Jeffords said. "We also heard that the EPA is still in the very early stages of collecting the soil and water samples that are needed to determine whether it is safe for residents to return to the area."

EPA officials are taking samples daily at sites around New Orleans for biological pathogens and more than 100 chemical pollutants, including pesticides, metals and industrial chemicals.

Tests by aircraft of the city's air, which has a strong stench even from a couple hundred feet up, indicated no potential health issues. Only a few air pollutants were detected, such as methanol, a wood alcohol, isobutylene, a flammable gas, and freon, a refrigerant.

Federal agencies aren't predicting when the city will be habitable.

Five Superfund sites in the region containing some of the nation's worst toxic messes were flooded, and one of them, a landfill where residents took trash for decades, remains underwater and can't be reached to assess. Among all the flooded areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, there are 31 Superfund sites.

There have been five oil spills in the New Orleans area. Some hazardous waste railcars are believed to be flooded, with water at least up to the wheels, although federal rail officials say they've had no reports of leakage so far.

Tests also turned up elevated levels of E. coli and other coliform bacteria that can cause vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain and fever. The floodwaters in New Orleans show levels of E. coli up to 109 times the EPA's safe swimming limit.

The latest chemical samples were drawn Sept. 4 and Sept. 6 by the EPA and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. Like previous tests, they turned up high levels of chemicals such as hexavalent chromium, arsenic and lead. A slightly elevated level of thallium was detected at one sampling location, but it was not enough to harm the public.

"An enormous amount of debris," such as tree limbs and building materials, and more than 5,000 "orphan containers" _ gas cylinders and at least one barrel of medical waste _ have been recovered, said Johnson, who dispatched nearly 650 agency officials and contractors and 50 watercraft to the Gulf coast.

Before they could start assessing the environmental damage and public health risks, EPA personnel helped rescue about 800 people from the floodwaters, Johnson said.

Young children are most susceptible to illness because their immune systems still are developing. However, the EPA said the amount of chemicals found in the water would pose a risk to children only if a child were to drink a liter of floodwater a day.

Still, officials from the EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention strongly urge people not to wade in or drink the standing water. If contact can't be avoided, soap and water should be used to clean exposed areas.

Some outside experts said the EPA should not promote a false sense of security.

"There's a tendency of looking at numbers that are extremely low and getting a sense of security. The fact that the levels are low is to be expected, because you have so much dilution," said Anthony Buonicore, chairman of Milford, Conn.-based Environmental Data Resources Inc.

Buonicore, whose company collects historical environmental data from federal, state and local governments, said that "even though levels of some chemicals may be extremely low, what ultimately happens in the food chain is important." He said the sampling of sediment and sludge, which the EPA has begun, would be more revealing.

The company's data shows the flooded region contained 121 sites with known contamination, including Superfund sites, landfills or leaking underground storage tanks. One site was used to produce gas from coal to light city streets until the early 1900s.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin has said the EPA test results will be a factor in determining how quickly residents are allowed to return.

The EPA cautioned, however, that people trying to return to homes and businesses after Katrina may be exposed to hazards such as leaking natural gas lines.

While disease fears have caught the public's attention, injuries are the main concern, CDC hurricane relief specialist Carol Rubin said. A growing concern as more residents return to New Orleans are chain saw injuries and carbon monoxide poisoning from generators, she said.

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